

Making the link: **energy efficiency** and health equity

The World Health Organization's **Commission on the Social Determinants of Health** (CSDH) has identified principles and recommendations to tackle health inequities: the factors responsible for avoidable health inequalities, which persist globally and in the European Union. This series of summaries, updated and expanded online at www.equitychannel.net, introduces how those and other recommendations, as part of evidence based health promoting approaches, could be applied to a range of European Union legislations, policies and programmes. The aim is to improve international, national and local policies and practices within and beyond health systems, in order to promote better health and well-being for all.

Why making the link matters

An EU priority is to improve energy efficiency, in particular for buildings (and transport, to be addressed in a future Policy Précis). At present this is driven by two objectives:

- Mitigating climate change by reducing emissions and saving energy
- Making economic savings

But there is a third dimension to energy efficiency which does not yet sufficiently inform policy-making – that of health equity. Improving the conditions of daily life - the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work and age - is a priority for achieving health equity, for example by paying attention to the environments in which people live. The condition of our built environment matters for health; so does affordable energy. Buildings are responsible for around 40% of the EU's carbon dioxide emissions. It makes sense to bring together approaches to achieve objectives of mitigating climate change and reducing health inequities, to help create healthier places, healthier people... and a healthier planet.



The Situation

- **Energy Poverty**

Low-income households in Europe tend to occupy more inefficient, older buildings. Fuel poverty is a massive problem for those on low incomes; inefficient buildings exacerbate this problem and waste resources. Energy inefficient buildings are expensive to heat (or cool) and worsen the 'eat or heat' dilemma. The Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) shows that 17% of households in Ireland are fuel poor.^I Energy poverty is a particular problem amongst elderly people, and contributes to winter deaths, notably in urban areas.^{II}

- **Use of resources**

Energy efficiency measures often focus upon 'new-built' houses, while poor quality, older housing stock both wastes the most energy and also generates the worst living conditions. Attempts to improve housing conditions through demolition and replacement of older properties are more expensive and slow to realise. The solution is rather to upgrade existing buildings. The Strategic Review of health inequalities in England found that, 'Home upgrading in poorer areas brings many benefits, including greater energy and water efficiency, tackling fuel poverty, helping attract more mixed communities and mitigating the impact of climate change.'^{III}

- **Health and air quality**

Energy efficiency measures targeted at buildings can also improve indoor air quality, impacting upon the health of occupants, particularly in relation to problems such as asthma. A study of an intervention in England to improve the quality of social housing noted positive improvements to health and well-being, as well as energy efficiency gains.^{IV} Another report of action in the UK (Sheffield's Decent Homes Programme) found a major impact on the health and quality of life of residents – reducing heart and respiratory disease, reducing the number of accidents in the home and giving greater security and mental well-being.^V



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Setting an example

The **DETERMINE**, a DG SANCO co-funded and EuroHealthNet coordinated project, has reviewed several initiatives to improve housing quality, linking health equity with energy efficiency. Initiatives reviewed include National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (England), the Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal - People and Places (Northern Ireland), Powerful Neighbourhoods (Netherlands), and the use of data on health and housing within the national housing development plan (Development Plan for Estonian Housing).^{vi} The Determine project has also found that social housing projects could be a productive entry point for collaboration on health equity with policy makers.

A combination of measures is known to be beneficial. For example, in Belgium (Wallonia) the “**MEBAR fund**” is dedicated to urgent investment targeted at people experiencing fuel poverty, and can incorporate investment in new glazing, window frames, or new heating stoves. These measures are combined with a special electricity tariff (the “tariff social”) which is available to people on low incomes. In addition, social action centres (CPAS – “Centre public d’action sociale”) which are linked to the municipalities, also offer “guidance énergétique sociale”, to assist people in the situation of fuel poverty to reduce their energy bill.^{vii}

Pathways to progress

- **Targets**

Opportunities exist to create synergies between energy efficiency and health equity through EU policy-making. The EU has committed to achieve 20% energy efficiency gains by the year 2020. At present that is not supported by legally binding commitments, but it is likely that there will need to be increased levels of action if the target is to be reached. This could require both better regulations, introducing binding minimum standards for buildings at an earlier stage, and applying them more broadly, as well as greater commitments to invest money for retro-fitting buildings, in the knowledge that such investments deliver rapid returns.

- **Legislation**

The recast Energy Performance of Buildings Directive has the potential to greatly improve the energy efficiency of urban homes, with a consequent positive impact upon health equity. The Directive requires the establishment of minimum standards on energy performance in new and existing buildings. Whilst the health equity benefits arising from action to improve the energy efficiency of buildings are not always considered, the EU’s Impact Assessment of the recast Energy Performance of Buildings Directive does cite positive health benefits as one of the likely outcomes of measures to improve energy performance of buildings.^{viii} The EU is also considering following the examples of Sweden and France, by introducing an EU carbon tax. Such a measure could greatly increase energy efficiency, but also has the potential to exacerbate health inequalities through energy poverty, if attention is not paid to this issue.

- **Strategies**

Improving indoor air quality is also a concern of the EU Environment and Health Strategy. The European Commission is likely to renew its EU Energy Efficiency Action Plan (EEAP). A reinforced EEAP could prove a significant driver towards the renovation of social housing and low-quality housing stock.

- **Programmes and initiatives**

The EU also plays a role in funding programmes to improve energy efficiency through the Structural Funds. There are also various EU-wide initiatives in relation to energy efficiency where the EU plays a supporting role, such as the Covenant of Mayors, BUILD UP, and Sustainable Energy Europe.

Additional Information

- **DETERMINE** - www.health-inequalities.eu
- **Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health**
- **Fair Society, Healthy Lives – Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post 2010**
- **Directorate General for Energy**

Contacts

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Sources

- ⁱ Closing the gap in a generation. Report of the World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, Geneva, 2008.
- ⁱⁱ Study on Urban Environments Well-being and Health and The Urban Environment. Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, 2007.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post-2010, Task Group 4: The Built Environment and Health Inequalities, P.11, http://www.ucl.ac.uk/gheg/marmotreview/consultation/Built_environment_report
- ^{iv} The Watcombe Housing Study, Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, 61:771-777, Barton et al, 2007.
- ^v Decent Homes Better Health - Sheffield Decent Homes Health Impact Assessment. Gilbertson, Green & Ormandy, Sheffield Hallam University, 2006.
- ^{vi} Voices from Other Fields: An Account of 40 Consultations with non-health policy makers and politicians across Europe on tackling the socio-economic determinants of Health Inequalities. Fasso, S., DETERMINE Working Document No. 3, EuroHealthNet and IUHPE, Brussels, 2008 and Economic arguments for addressing social determinants of health inequalities. Lavin, T & Metcalfe, O., DETERMINE Working Document No 4. Institute of Public Health in Ireland and EuroHealthNet, Brussels, 2009.
- ^{vii} European Fuel Poverty and Energy Efficiency project, <http://www.fuel-poverty.org>
- ^{viii} Impact Assessment. Proposal for a Directive on energy performance of buildings (recast). European Commission (DG TREN), Brussels, 2008. Report available at: http://ec.europa.eu/governance/impact/ia_carried_out/cia_2008_en.htm#tren